On the urgencies and potential of feminist hacker initiatives

Prologue

Being a western millennial woman, I was raised together with my Internet. Every day, on my numerous open tabs, I encounter news, advertisements, gossips and chronicles; vibrant mosaics of information appear on my small, medium and large devices. Assisted by the magic technologies that come to my hand, I do things faster, more efficiently, more precise. One might think these growing capabilities would lead to autonomy. Here, however, one encounters a paradox, as consuming these ever-developing technologies raises instead the issue of dependence. We depend on those who develop and distribute technology, on their business plans or their contributions to social value. And we change with it (Padilla, 2017). It is thus critical to keep questioning what technological horizons are relevant for us and how we are building them.

In my early adult years, influenced by European autonomous movements, I got involved in Greek political and activist communities. Their aim was mainly to point out social exclusions in terms of class, race, ethnicity and gender, and to critique the imbalances of current power structures. For such groups, exploring ways to become more technologically sovereign is still a constant struggle. Their critique of contemporary technology production make them skeptical towards new technologies and their use for surveillance, control, and oppression by power institutions. While I agree with this tendency, I have noticed a gap between theory and practice inside these communities. How can we overcome the binary notion of producers and consumers, let alone imagine autonomy, without having basic technological literacy and skills?

Willing to practically engage with technology, I started looking for places that could be starting points for amateurs like me. Some of my male friends who were software developers and open-technology enthusiasts suggested me to attend a hackerspace. However, I was discouraged to join due to shared experiences from my close female friends who have already attempted to enter hacker communities. They described them as male-dominated, competitive, massively technocentric and hard to fit in as a woman. While I was still searching for spaces to acquire technical skills at my own pace, I received an invitation to an international event which combines technology with feminism. My inspiring participation in this gathering triggered me to further study the work of feminist hacker initiatives.

In this thesis, I will explore how the origin of hacker culture, present in technological circles and hackerspaces, is problematic and creates, among others, gender-based social exclusions. Moreover, I will narrate how sexism and misogyny reproduce in the geekdom, highlighting the importance of responding to this phenomenon. Finally, I will reflect on the urgencies and suggestions of feminist hacker communities, stressing the value of supporting their work. Not only because they create safe spaces for excluded individuals to gain agency with technology, but also because, as ethnographer and researcher Christina Dunbar-Hester, puts it, they redefine who counts as a hacker, and what counts as hacking (Dunbar-Hester, 2019). Their efforts to encourage collective knowledge production and experimental Do-It-Together practices in inclusive and diverse environments initiate a technological future where I could see myself fitting.